

Why Is Amnesty Apologising for Telling the Truth About Ukrainian War Crimes?

Allowing only one side to be criticised for its crimes - reinforcing the loaded western political narrative of good guys versus bad guys - is likely to fuel the war rather than resolve it

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Should a human rights organisation apologise for publishing important evidence of war crimes and human rights abuses?

If it does apologise, what does that suggest about its commitment to dispassionately uncovering the truth about the actions of both parties to war? And equally, what message does it send to those who claim to be “distressed” by the publication of such evidence?

Those are questions Amnesty International should have pondered far more carefully than it obviously did before issuing an apology last week over its latest report on the [war in Ukraine](#).

[In that report](#), Amnesty accused Ukrainian forces of committing war crimes by stationing troops and artillery in or near schools, hospitals and residential buildings, thereby using civilians effectively as human shields. Such practices by Ukrainian soldiers were identified in 19 different towns and villages.

These incidents did not just theoretically endanger civilians. There is evidence, [according to Amnesty](#), that return fire by Russian troops on these Ukrainian positions led to non-combatants being killed.

The [Israeli](#) army regularly accuses [Palestinian](#) factions like Hamas of [hiding among civilians in Gaza](#), while obscuring its own, long-documented practice of using [Palestinians as human shields](#).

But whatever the truth of Israel’s claims, unlike the tiny and massively overcrowded Gaza, which offers few or no hiding places outside of built-up areas for Palestinian fighters to resist

Israeli aggression, Amnesty concluded of the situation in Ukraine: “Viable alternatives were available that would not endanger civilians – such as military bases or densely wooded areas nearby, or other structures further away from residential areas.”

In other words, it was a choice made by the Ukrainian army to put its own civilians in harm’s way.

Mounting pressure

Notably, this is the first time a major western human rights organisation has publicly scrutinised the behaviour of Ukraine’s soldiers. Until now, these watchdog bodies have focused exclusively on reports of crimes committed by Russian forces – a position entirely in line with the priorities of their own governments. [By its own admission](#), Amnesty has published dozens of reports condemning Russia.

The pushback against the latest report was relentless, coming even from Amnesty’s own Ukrainian team. Oksana Pokalchuk, its head, quit, [explaining that her team](#) “did everything they could to prevent this material from being published”.

Under mounting pressure, Amnesty made a statement last week in which it said it “[deeply regrets the distress and anger](#)” caused by its report, while at the same time stating: “We fully stand by our findings.”

The idea that only one side has been committing war crimes in Ukraine was always implausible. In wars, all sides commit crimes. It is in the nature of wars.

Faulty lines of communication mean orders are misunderstood or only partially relayed to those on the front lines. There are technical malfunctions. Inevitably, soldiers prioritise their own lives over those of the enemy, including civilians. Terrorising the other side – through human rights violations – can be an effective way to avoid combat, by sending a warning to enemy soldiers to desert their posts and civilians to flee. Sadists and psychopaths, meanwhile, find themselves with plenty of opportunities to exploit during the fighting.

But conversely, parties to wars invariably struggle to acknowledge their own abuses. They prefer simple-minded, self-serving narratives of good and evil: our soldiers are heroes, morally spotless, while their soldiers are barbarians, indifferent to the value of human life.

Western governments and establishment media outlets have readily peddled this foolish line in Ukraine, too, even though neither Europe nor the United States are supposed to be directly involved in the war. They have reflexively amplified [Ukrainian claims of Russian war crimes](#), even when the evidence is lacking or the picture murky, and they have resolutely ignored any [evidence of Ukrainian crimes](#), such as [evidence](#) that Russian prisoners of war have been executed or that Ukraine has been [using petal cluster bombs](#) in civilian areas.

More self-censorship

In such circumstances, only the human rights community is in a position to provide a more faithful picture of how events are unfolding, and hold to account both sides for their crimes. But until Amnesty stepped out of line, western human rights groups had moved in lockstep with western governments, the same governments that appear to [want endless war in Ukraine](#), to “weaken Russia”, rather than a quick resolution.

Even the author of Amnesty's new report, Donatella Rovera, [has conceded](#): "I think the level of self-censorship on this issue [Ukrainian war crimes] has been pretty extraordinary."

Amnesty should not be apologising for providing a rare window on such crimes. It should be emphasising the importance of monitoring both sides for serious breaches of international law. And for very good reason.

Amnesty's apology sends a message to those partisans trying to shut down scrutiny of Ukrainian crimes of just how easy it is to put the human rights community on the defensive. Efforts to deter reporting of a similar nature in the future will intensify.

Ukraine's foreign affairs minister, Dmytro Kuleba, was among those who lost no time vilifying Amnesty by characterising its report as "[Russian disinformation](#)".

Amnesty's apology suggests such pressure campaigns have an effect and will lead to increased self-censorship - in a situation where the evidence already indicates that there is a great deal of self-censorship, as Rovera pointed out.

The apology betrays the civilians who have been, and will be, used as human shields - putting them in lethal danger - over the coming months and potentially years of fighting. It means Ukrainian forces will feel even less pressure to rein in behaviour that amounts to a war crime.

Amnesty would never apologise to Russian partisans offended by a report on Russian war crimes. Its current apology indicates to the victims of Ukrainian human rights abuses that they are less worthy than the victims of Russian abuses.

Flooding the battlefield

Turning a blind eye to Ukrainian crimes also lifts the pressure on western governments. They have been recklessly channelling arms worth many billions of dollars to Ukraine, even though they have little idea where most end up. (In a further worrying sign of self-censorship in the west, [CBS recently postponed the broadcast](#) of an investigation suggesting as little as a third of western weapons reach their intended destination in Ukraine.)

That is all the more dangerous because, even before Russia's invasion in late February, Ukrainian forces - including the [neo-Nazi elements](#) now glossed over in western narratives - were engaged in a vicious civil war with ethnic Russian communities in Ukraine's east. That region, the Donbas, is where Moscow has been focusing its military advances.

Human rights violations by Ukrainians against other Ukrainians were regularly committed during the eight-year civil war, as western monitors [documented at the time](#). Such crimes are almost certainly continuing under cover of the war against Russia, but with the aid now of western arms shipments.

Ignoring abuses by Ukrainian forces gives them a free hand to commit crimes not only against Russian soldiers but also against the large number of Ukrainians who are not seen as loyal to Kyiv.

A failure to closely scrutinise how and where western artillery is being used is almost certain to result in more, not less, of the kind of Ukrainian crimes Amnesty has just highlighted.

Western governments, and publics, need to be confronted with the likely consequences of flooding the battlefield with weapons before they prefer such a policy over pursuing diplomatic solutions.

Ultimately, allowing one side only to be criticised for its crimes – reinforcing the simple-minded narrative of good guys versus bad guys – is likely to fuel the war rather than resolve it.

War-mongering

Amnesty's conduct over this latest report is not exceptional. It is part of a pattern of behaviour by a western human rights community vulnerable to political and financial pressures that detract from its ostensible mission.

As the near-exclusive focus on Russian crimes in Ukraine illustrates, international humanitarian law is all too often interpreted through the [prism of western political priorities](#).

There has long been a [revolving door](#) between the staff of prominent human rights groups and the US government. And [pressure from elite donors](#) – who are invested in these dominant narratives – doubtless plays a part, too.

Anyone departing from the narrow political consensus imposed by western political and media elites is defamed as spreading Russian “disinformation”, or for being apologists for dictators like [Syria's](#) Bashar al-Assad or [Libya's](#) late ruler [Muammar Gaddafi](#). Criticisms of Israel, meanwhile, are demonised as proof of antisemitism.

Certainly, Russian, Syrian and Libyan leaders have committed war crimes. But the focus on their crimes is all too often an excuse to avoid addressing western war crimes, and thereby enable agendas that advance the interests of the West's war industries.

I experienced this first hand during the month-long conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. Israel accused Hezbollah of using its own population as “human shields” – framed by the Norwegian politician and United Nations official Jan Egeland as “cowardly blending” – an allegation lapped up [by the western media](#).

Whatever the truth of that claim, it presented a very one-sided picture of what took place during that summer's fighting. Though no one was allowed to mention it at the time because of Israel's strict military censorship laws, it was common knowledge among Israel's minority of Palestinian citizens that many of their own communities in northern Israel were being used as locations for Israeli tanks and artillery to fire into [Lebanon](#).

The Israeli army had forcibly recruited these third-class citizens as human shields, just as the Ukrainian army is now accused by Amnesty of doing to civilians.

I saw for myself a number of the locations where Israel had installed batteries in or next to the minority's communities. There were later Israeli court cases that confirmed this widespread practice; Palestinian politicians in Israel raised the matter in the Israeli parliament, and a local human rights group later [issued a report](#) documenting examples of these war crimes.

But these revelations never gained any traction with either the western media or human rights groups. Western publics were left with an entirely false impression: that Hezbollah

alone had endangered its own civilians, even though Israel had undoubtedly done the same or worse.

The reality could not be acknowledged because it conflicted with western political priorities that treat Israel as a valued ally with a moral army and Hezb0llah as a depraved, bloodthirsty terrorist organisation.

Saints and sinners

Human rights groups reporting on the 2006 Lebanon war actively echoed these self-serving western narratives that unfairly differentiated between Hezb0llah and Israel, as I highlighted at the time.

I found myself in a very public row with Human Rights Watch over comments made by one of its researchers to the New York Times claiming that Hezb0llah had intentionally targeted Israeli civilians whereas Israel had avoided targeting Lebanese civilians.

He stated: "I mean, it's perfectly clear that Hezbollah is directly targeting civilians, and that their aim is to kill Israeli civilians. We don't accuse the Israeli army of deliberately trying to kill civilians."

In my subsequent back-and-forth with HRW - which can be read about [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) - the organisation sought to defend this claim. But there were two glaring problems.

First, it completely failed to fit the known facts of the war. Israel's strikes on Lebanon had caused a disproportionately large number of civilian deaths, despite the use of precision weapons. Hezb0llah, using far more primitive rockets, meanwhile, had killed mostly soldiers, not civilians.

But more problematic still, HRW had ascribed intentions to each side - good and bad - when it could not possibly know what those intentions were. As I [wrote at the time](#) of its researcher's comments:

"Was he or another HRW researcher sitting in one of the military bunkers in northern Israel when army planners pressed the button to unleash the missiles from their spy drones? Was he sitting alongside the air force pilots as they circled over Lebanon dropping their US-made bombs or tens of thousands of 'cluster munitions', tiny land mines that are now sprinkled over a vast area of south Lebanon? Did he have intimate conversations with the Israeli chiefs of staff about their war strategy? Of course not. He has no more idea than you or I what Israel's military planners and its politicians decided was necessary to achieve their war goals."

HRW's comments made sense only in a political context: that the group faced enormous pressure from US politicians and funders to focus on Hezb0llah's crimes. It also faced a damaging vilification campaign led by Israel lobbyists who wished to shield Israel from scrutiny. They accused the [group's senior staff of antisemitism](#) and spreading a blood libel.

It looked very much like HRW caved into that pressure, just as Amnesty is now effectively doing in apologising for upsetting Ukrainian partisans and those emotionally invested in the one-sided narrative they hear constantly from their politicians and media.

Neither Amnesty nor Human Rights Watch responded to a request for comment.

The reality is that western publics need more, not less, scrutiny of the crimes committed in wars, if only to tear the facade off narratives designed to paint a picture of saints and sinners - narratives that dehumanise official enemies and fuel more war.

The minimum needed to achieve that is an independent, fearless, vigorous human rights community, not an apologetic one.

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Featured image: A Ukrainian soldier carries a Javelin anti-tank missile through a trench in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Photo courtesy the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine/Facebook.

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